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An Epilogue To the Mole Hunt

An American spy at 22 and a veteran of the twilight struggle against Soviet espionage in cold-war Europe, Peter Karlow rose to what he calls "a hell of a sensitive job" at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. One day in 1963, he recalls, an agency security man called him in to ask a question so frightening it seemed ludicrous: "Do you know you're in serious trouble because you're a traitor?" Karlow laughed but his interrogator was dead serious. A Soviet defector had picked him out as a possible double agent—a "mole," in spy-world slang—who had betrayed the CIA's West German operations from within. Karlow fought back and was ultimately cleared, but his career had been ruined. He retired that year and is now a business consultant in Washington, D.C.

Karlow thus became one of the more prominent victims of the great CIA mole hunt—a search for suspected traitors that began with the defection of Soviet spy Anatoli Golitsin in 1961 and continued into the mid-1970s. The mole hunt affected at least a dozen CIA careers; the exact number is known only to the agency. Karlow and his fellow victims were left out in the cold—their reputations damaged and their finances blighted by agency regulations that barred compensation for lost promotions and pensions they might have earned. Now the CIA has begun to make amends: an otherwise prosaic budget bill nearing enactment in Congress permits CIA director Stansfield Turner to grant "monetary or other relief" to agents penalized by "unjustified administrative actions" or "unjustified negative career development."

The case against Karlow was only circumstantial. The best clue to the mole's identity, Golitsin said, was that his name began with "K" and ended in "-ski"; Karlow had been born Klibonski. Other clues led nowhere. Allegedly, the mole had been in Berlin on a certain day—but U.S. Army records showed Karlow had been in Bavaria. "Instead of dropping the case," Karlow says, "they looked at me and said I must be a more clever agent than they thought." Under that kind of suspicion, he says, "there is no way you can be of any use to the agency," and he quit. Within a few months, Golitsin changed his tune, identifying a Russian émigré CIA operative in Berlin who had once used a name that also began wit
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sian, was of Yu slav descent and socialized with Soviet spies—the better to know them, he said. He was quietly transferred to Latin America, and it was years before he learned why. Retired at 53, he lives on his agency pension in Jacksonville, N.C. Investigators also constructed a circumstantial case against Garbler—including the fact that he had played tennis with a British intelligence officer who later confessed to being a Soviet spy. He was reassigned to Port of Spain, Trinidad. Garbler was later rehabilitated and named to head the CIA station in Stockholm, but he soon retired and now, at 62, sells real estate in Tucson, Ariz. There were others as well—some of whom, Karlow says, "were just dumped out on the street."

Kovich and Garbler eventually took their grievances to the Senate Intelligence Committee. With the CIA's support, the committee drafted a provision that would allow victims of the mole hunt to apply for redress—in Karlow's case, a pension for twenty years of service that began in World War II. It may also bring a flood of claims from other cashiered CIA operatives, some justified and some not. Adjudicating those claims promises to create years of headaches for Turner and his successors, and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in retroactive pay and benefits. But it seems a small price to help make amends for false accusations of treason.

TOM MORGANTHAU with DAVID C. MARTIN in Washington